

Text: Heb 5.11-14

Since Heb 4.14 we've been looking at the role of our Lord Jesus as high priest. The author begins to set up the comparison with Aaron. We've worked through some significant theological ideas in these messages.

Now, in Heb 5.11, the author changes tack before delving deeper on the priesthood of Christ. The next section is sometimes called a "warning passage." It begins in 5.11, but whether it ends in the middle of chapter 6 or at the end is debated in the commentaries.

There are two things to notice about the structure of the passage that will help us on this a bit.

1. The word "dull of hearing" (5.11) and "sluggish" (6.12) are the same underlying word in the Gk. This seems to create an inclusio between 5.11 and 6.12, and this is where the break is in chapter 6.
2. The author mentions "elementary teaching" (5.12) and "elementary principles" (6.1) – these are different Gk words, but similar concepts, seemingly tying 5.11-14 and 6.1-12 together.

My point: the passage, at least from 5.11 to 6.12 is a unit. This is important because of certain statements in chapter 6 that can shake our understanding of the permanence of salvation.

We will get there in due course, but today I want to focus on where believers ought to be after having followed Christ for some time.

Read Heb 5.11-14, text mostly 11-12

We should pause and comment on some introductory matters of Hebrews again.

- Date: after Paul's execution before temple destruction so AD 65-67 or so
- Audience: Hebrew Christians who were wavering over the question of returning to Judaism
- Location of recipients: probably Jerusalem converts, or at least Palestinian converts, facing *Jewish* pressure against Christianity
- Crucifixion: approx. AD 30
- Time span: over thirty years after Pentecost, many Jewish converts of long standing in the region

In other words, we are not talking about a group of people who are primarily brand new Christians, in their first year or two of faith.

There are all kinds of churches, with varied histories. We started our church over thirty-five years ago. In those early years, we made a lot of mistakes, we were full of young Christians, and you would have to say that any kind of “shock” to the system could end up dissolving our church.

I’ve also preached in churches of some size, and certainly some that were much more long-established than ours. When shocks come, the more mature church can handle it without imploding (usually). The largest church I ever preached in suffered a couple of devastating shocks, but it had a couple generations of history on us, and it continues to this day, serving God in their location.

Our church is much stronger today than it was in the early years. That doesn’t mean we are invincible, but we are stronger today than we were.

You expect a church to be building up an increasing sense of maturity. That’s what our passage is saying about the Hebrews and their church. The author says he expects them to be one thing, but their wavering makes him suspect they are another thing. That’s our subject today.

What You Ought to Be

Proposition: When Christians don’t progress spiritually, they slip back, endangering their testimony.

I. A great subject: Our Great High Priest

A. Identifying the great subject

1. We have what is called a “relative pronoun” here – “concerning him”
 - a. The pronoun points to something already mentioned – three possibilities
 - 1) Could point directly to Melchizedek (last word of v. 10)
 - 2) Could point to Jesus (subject of vv. 5-10)
 - 3) Could be impersonal, encompassing the whole concept of the priesthood of Christ (“concerning this” or “concerning which”)

b. Answer: “Our Great High Priest” (see 4.14)

- 1) It at least points to Jesus, even though after the exhortation, the next subject is Melchizedek (ch. 7)
- 2) But I think it best to point to the totality of the priesthood of Christ, which is the main subject of Hebrews

“It is the whole subject under discussion, and not simply the priesthood like Melchizedek’s, that requires the skill of the writer and the attention of the community.”¹

2. Of this subject, there is “much to say”

- a. Lit. “Concerning which, much to us the discourse, and explanation is hard to say, since dull you have become to hear”
- b. “much to say” could be “there are many words”

It will take us from Hebrews 4.14 through the end of chapter 10 — many words

B. The topic is complex and requires attention

1. Unique word behind “hard to explain”
2. Root is the word we get hermeneutics (science of interpretation) from
3. Prefix has the notion of “*hard, bad, difficult*”
4. Consequently, “hard to explain” or
 - a. “Hard to interpret”
 - b. “Hard to translate”

Some biblical subjects are challenging, they require a strong foundation and spiritual insight to take them in.

C. The subject of “our great high priest”

1. Contains much information
2. Is challenging to our understanding

¹ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 135–36.

The writer of Hebrews, though, expects us to grasp it, but he observes a hindrance *besides* the difficulty of the subject...

II. A worrisome hindrance: The Christian's Regress

A. The Christians have regressed from their former achievements

1. “**you have become** dull of hearing”
2. “by this time **you ought to be...**”
3. “you have **come to need** milk”

They are not where they once were, they are slipping backwards.

B. The process of growth in the Christian life

1. One expects new Christians to make mistakes — no one can take in all the implications of Christianity overnight
2. John describes three stages of Christian growth (1 Jn 2.12-14)
 - a. Children
 - b. Young men
 - c. Fathers
3. The implication of “you have become dull of hearing”
 - a. Perfect tense – a long developed condition
 - b. Once they were hearing just fine
 - c. Now they have become (at some point in the past) dull of hearing

It is like they are asleep while standing up.

C. The consequence of dullness

1. You need to relearn the ABCs of Christian life
2. Solid food is too much for them

Some commentators think the author is ironic here

D. Understanding what it takes to regress: stop progressing

1. Even though John describes three stages in his epistle, there are only two stages in view here
 - a. Maturity
 - b. Babyhood
2. The picture seems to be that they had come along fine, up to a point, but had stopped moving

“Their sluggishness showed itself in a disposition to settle down at the point which they had reached, since to go farther would have meant too complete a severing of old ties. To such people the exposition of the high-priestly service of Christ, with the corollary that the old order of priesthood and sacrifice had been abolished once for all, might well have been unacceptable; the intellect is not over-ready to entertain an idea that the heart finds unpalatable.²”

3. If you come along in your spiritual life and get to a certain point, but decide “that’s far enough”
 - a. You don’t just stop your progress, you start to regress
 - b. There is an assumption that Christian growth is merely getting more and more theology: it is not
 - c. There is a spiritual maturity that needs to come about

Jesus called us in the Great Commission to “make disciples.”

- Conversion alone not enough
- Instruction added in also not enough
- Discipleship, picking up one’s cross, serving one’s brothers, reaching out to our world – all of this is involved

² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 136.

III. A spiritual obligation: The “Oughtness” of Progress

A. You **ought** to be teachers

1. In the financial world, this word has the idea of indebtedness, you have an obligation
2. In the life of the Spirit, it speaks of our obligation to Christ for service

B. The idea of being teachers

1. Does not require a formal office
2. Speaks of spiritual development
3. Reminds me of Paul’s compulsion

¹ Cor 9.16 For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.

C. The opportunity for growing believers

1. You can be a teacher without a formal position
2. But especially to our young people, consider how God can use you as a teacher in days to come
 - a. Not everyone has the gifts for full time Christian ministry
 - b. But some do — wouldn’t it glorify God if some of our young people caught this burden?
3. In any case, all of us ought to press on in our spiritual lives so we can be teachers wherever God puts us

Conclusion:

Proposition: When Christians don’t progress spiritually, they slip back, endangering their testimony.

I put that negatively. These Hebrew Christians were allowing doubts and fears to shake their faith.

Let’s put it positively:

Christians should progress spiritually, so they don’t slip back, but become an example to others.

Today I've spoken focusing on present believers. I mean to say that if you aren't a believer there is room for you to come as well. God can use you if you will give your heart to him.

Salvation isn't just a gift to you, it's an opportunity to share in giving God's gift to everyone you know.